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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to provide some insight into the Baha'i conception of education, with a particular focus on the way that Baha'is conceive of an "educated person." In spite of the growth of the Baha'i faith in recent years, this, the youngest of the monotheistic religions, remains little known and even less understood as a religious community. As a result, the educational thought and practice of the Baha'is also has been overlooked. Relying on both the extensive body of writings of Baha'u'llah, 'Abdu'l-Baha, and Shoghi Effendi, as well as the secondary Baha'i sources concerned explicitly with education and related topics, the paper begins with a brief overview of the Baha'i faith, focusing on its social teachings and commitment and its historical and theological context. The social teachings feature nine principles of faith, including the oneness of humanity, the elimination of prejudice in all forms, and universal education. Education is seen as both of instrumental value and of spiritual value. The educational ideals and goals of the Baha'i community are discussed with the conceptualization of the "educated person" for that community. Contains 32 references. (EH)

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The Bahá'í View of the Educated Person:

A Case Study in Religious Education

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The Bahá'í View of the Educated Person:

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> *Address yourselves to the promotion of the well-being and tranquillity of the children of men. Bend your minds and wills to the education of the peoples and kindreds of the earth, that haply the dissensions that divide it may, through the power of the Most Great Name, be blotted out from its face, and all mankind become the upholders of one Order, and the inhabitants of one City. (Bahá'u'lláh, 1976, pp. 333-334)*

The Bahá'í faith is the youngest of the world's monotheistic religions. Established by the Persian religious leader Bahá'u'lláh (the name means "the Glory of God") in the nineteenth century, it is a religion that has grown from relative obscurity to one with more than five million believers in more than two hundred countries around the world (Bahá'í International Community, 1994, p. 7).[1] Bahá'ís include individuals from most of the world's ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups, as well as individuals drawn from virtually all of the world's different religions (Esslemont, 1980, pp. 285-286). In essence, Bahá'ís believe that "all religions are culturally shaped and therefore relative to the times and societies in which they develop" (Fisher, 1994, p. 384). The goal of Bahá'ís is to recognize both the diversity of humanity and, at the same time, its fundamental unity. Thus, Bahá'ís seek the creation of a unified, peaceful global society (see 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1990).

In spite of the growth of the Bahá'í faith in recent years, it remains little known and even less understood as a religious community. Not surprisingly, this has meant that the educational thought and practice of the Bahá'ís has also been, for the most part, overlooked. In this presentation, an attempt will be made to provide some insight into the Bahá'í conception of education, with a particular focus on the way that Bahá'ís conceive of an "educated person." Relying on both the extensive body of writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi, as well as on secondary Bahá'í sources concerned explicitly with education and related topics, this paper will begin with a brief overview of the Bahá'í faith, and its historical and theological context. The educational ideals and goals of the Bahá'í community will then be

discussed in the broader context of the conceptualization of the "educated person" for that community. It is important to note at the outset, however, that a comprehensive presentation of what might be termed the Bahá'í "philosophy of education" will not be possible here, since, as Shoghi Effendi himself wrote in a letter to a believer:

> There is as yet no such thing as a Bahá'í curriculum, and there are no Bahá'í publications exclusively devoted to this subject, since the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá do not present a definite and detailed educational system, but simply offer certain basic principles and set forth a number of teaching ideals that should guide future Bahá'í educationalists in their efforts to formulate an adequate teaching curriculum which would be in full harmony with the spirit of the Bahá'í teachings, and would thus meet the requirements of the modern age . . . . But the task of formulating a system of education which would be officially recognized by the Cause, and enforced as such throughout the Bahá'í world is one which the present generation of believers cannot obviously undertake, and which has to be gradually accomplished by Bahá'í scholars and educationalists of the future. (Quoted in Hornby, 1983, p. 170)

Although these words were written in the late 1930s, they are still true today to a significant extent. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify the fundamental principles upon which such a Bahá'í philosophy of education must be based, as well as to describe to aims, goals and objectives of education as presented in the Bahá'í writings, and it is to this task that we now turn.

The Bahá'í Faith: An Overview

The Bahá'í faith can, for heuristic purposes, be analyzed in two ways: with respect to its social teachings and commitments, and with respect to its explicitly theological concerns. To be sure, these two perspectives on the Bahá'í faith are in fact merely different facets of a unified religious worldview, but the distinction is nevertheless a useful one for our purposes here. Beginning, then, with the social teachings and commitments of the Bahá'í faith, one is struck by the emphasis on unity which permeates the basic principles of the faith. Specifically, Bahá'ís are committed to the building of a global society, based on the following principles:

(1) the oneness of humanity;

(2) the equality of women and men;

(3) the elimination of prejudice in all forms;

(4) the elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty and a just distribution of wealth;

(5) an acceptance of the independent investigation of truth;

(6) universal education;

(7) the harmony of science and religion;

(8) the development of a world commonwealth of nations; and

(9) the need for a universal auxiliary language. (Bahá'í International Community, 1994, p. 28)

Underlying these principles is a powerful commitment to education broadly conceived, which permeates not only the writings of the founders of the Bahá'í faith,[2] but those of its followers as well. As Bahá'u'lláh himself noted, "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom" (quoted in Beint, 1993, p. 35). This view of the centrality of education for the Bahá'í, and, indeed, for all of humanity, includes not only the education of children, but extends to university education and beyond as well. Writing about the purposes of a university education, 'Abdu'l-Bahá commented that:

> First: Whole-hearted service to the cause of education, the unfolding of the mysteries of nature, the extension of the boundaries of pure science, the elimination of the causes of ignorance and social evils, a standard universal system of instruction, and the diffusion of the lights of knowledge and reality.
>
> Second: service to the cause of morality, raising the moral tone of the students, inspiring them with the sublimest ideals of ethical refinement, teaching them with altruism, inculcating in their lives the beauty of holiness and the excellency of virtue and animating them with the excellences and perfections of the religion of God.
>
> Third: Service to the oneness of humanity; so that each student may consciously realise that he is brother to all mankind, irrespective of religion or race. The thoughts of universal peace must be instilled into the minds of all the scholars, in order that they may become the armies of peace and the real servants of the body politic -- the world . . . (Quoted in Diehl, 1993, p. 49)

In short, education is seen by Bahá'ís as both of instrumental value and of spiritual value, and it is through education that social progress of the sort called for and predicted by Bahá'u'lláh can be accomplished.

The social principles of the Bahá'í faith, as important as they are, are really secondary in significance to the religious principles upon which the faith rests, and from which the social principles emerge. For Bahá'ís, religion is and has been the basis of all human civilization. It is religion that is the source and basis of human education and development (see National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, 1995, p. 7). As Bahá'u'lláh commented in ***Epistle to the Son of the Wolf,***

> Religion is, verily, the chief instrument for the establishment of order in the world, and of tranquillity amongst its peoples. The weakening of the pillars of religion hath strengthened the foolish, and emboldened them, and made them more arrogant. Verily I say: The greater the decline of religion, the more grievous the waywardness of the ungodly. This cannot but lead in the end to chaos and confusion. (Bahá'u'lláh, 1988a, p. 28)

The purpose of religion, from a Bahá'í perspective, is "to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men" (quoted in National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, 1995, p. 7). As Bahá'u'lláh himself noted,

> In truth, religion is a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world, for the fear of God impelleth man to hold fast to that which is good, and shun all evil. Should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquillity and peace cease to shine. Unto this will bear witness every man of true understanding. (Bahá'u'lláh, 1988b, p. 125)

This does not mean, though, that Bahá'ís are unaware of the many ways in which religion has been misused to sow the seeds of disunity and discord among people. Such misuses of religion, indeed, were the focus of considerable concern by Bahá'u'lláh, who explicitly warns:

> O ye children of men! The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men. Suffer it not to become a source of dissension and discord, of hate and enmity. (Bahá'u'lláh, 1972, p. 112)

In short, religion, from a Bahá'í perspective, is something of a double-edged sword: it is both the source of unity and progress, but a dangerous and divisive weapon when misused.

Bahá'ís believe in the ultimate unity of religions, while at the same time recognizing the considerable diversity in belief and practice among the world's religions. In essence, Bahá'ís believe that, since direct knowledge of God is not possible, there have, throughout human history, been a series of

messengers from God. These messengers, called "Manifestations of God," include Abraham, Noah, Buddah, Zoroaster, Christ, Moses, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh, among others (Momen, 1989, p. 144). The nature of the Manifestations is often explained by analogy to the sun and a perfect reflecting mirror: the sun represents God, while the Manifestations are the mirror. They thus reflect and radiate the light of God, although they are not themselves God. As Bahá'u'lláh explains the nature of the Manifestations of God:

> These Prophets and chosen Ones of God are the recipients and revealers of all the unchangeable attributes and names of God. They are the mirrors that truly and faithfully reflect the light of God. Whatsoever is applicable to them is in reality applicable to God, Himself, Who is both the Visible and the Invisible. The knowledge of Him, Who is the Origin of all things, and attainment unto Him, are impossible save through knowledge of, and attainment unto, these luminous Beings who proceed from the Sun of Truth. By attaining . . . to the presence of these holy Luminaries, the "Presence of God" Himself is attained. From their knowledge, the knowledge of God is revealed, and from the light of their countenance, the splendour of the Face of God is made manifest. (Bahá'u'lláh, 1950, p. 142)

Each of the Manifestations of God has conveyed both eternal spiritual truths, which are unchanging, as well as specific teachings, laws and ordinances intended for his own time and place (see Faizi, 1975, pp. 15-18). Thus, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains,

> All religious laws conform to reason, and are suited to the people for whom they are framed, and for the age in which they are to be obeyed. Religion has two main parts:
>
> (1) The Spiritual.
>
> (2) The Practical.
>
> The spiritual part never changes. All the Manifestations of God and His Prophets have taught the same truths and given the same spiritual law. They all teach the one code of morality. There is no division in the truth. The Sun has sent forth many rays to illumine human intelligence, the light is always the same.
>
> The practical part of religion deals with exterior forms and ceremonies, and with modes of punishment for certain offences. This is the material side of the law, and guides the customs and manners of the people. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1961, pp. 141-142)

Central to the concept of the Manifestations of God is the idea of progressive revelation (see Esslemont, 1980, pp. 122-124; Ferraby, 1957, pp. 46-48; Sheppherd, 1992, pp. 63-67). Basically, progressive revelation refers to the idea that God's Revelation to humanity is on-going and continual, rather

than final, in nature. There is a fundamental unity in the spiritual teachings of all of the Manifestations of God, as Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes:

> Beware, O believers in the Unity of God, lest ye be tempted to make any distinction between the Manifestations of His Cause, or to discriminate against the signs that have accompanied and proclaimed their Revelation. This indeed is the true meaning of Divine Unity . . . (Bahá'u'lláh, 1976, p. 59)

Although there is a unity in the spiritual teaching of the different Manifestations, at the same time, "in every Dispensation the light of Divine Revelation hath been vouchsafed unto men in direct proportion to their spiritual capacity" (Bahá'u'lláh, 1976, p. 87). Thus,

> Each succeeding Revelation is greater than the one that preceded it, as the capacity of the people to comprehend increases. With each dispensation social evolution has advanced, as the scope of man's sense of loyalty to a group has become wider -- from the family to the clan, tribe, city-state, nation and ultimately to the recognition of the oneness of mankind, the distinguishing feature of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. (Momen, 1989, p. 186)

In other words, as John Ferraby has explained, progressive revelation contains two important doctrines: first, that each Manifestation of God speaks in a particular socio-cultural and temporal context with specific needs and challenges, and second, that our ability to hear and understand God's message has also increased and advanced over time. Progressive revelation, in short, is fundamentally a doctrine of human religious evolution (Stockman, 1985, p. 58; see also Bausani, 1990). As Ferraby notes,

> Needs change, and the needs of yesterday are not the needs of today; laws that were fitting when mankind was young would not be fitting now. Progress decrees that the form of religion revealed for an earlier stage of man's development cannot suit the later stages too. Under the tuition of each of the Great Educators humanity advances, so that the next Manifestation of God comes to men prepared to hear what before was hidden. (Ferraby, 1966, p. 3)

Thus, what the doctrine of progressive revelation actually does is to serve as an explanation for the fundamental unity of the spiritual teachings of all of the Manifestations of God. As J. E. Esslemont writes in ***Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era,***

> So it is with the various prophetic teachings; their externals change from age to age, but each revelation is the fulfillment of its predecessors; they are not separate or incongruous, but different stages in the life history of the One Religion, which has in turn been revealed as seed, as bud and as flower, and now enters on the stage of fruition. (Esslemont, 1980, p. 124)

With this brief overview of the foundations of the Bahá'í faith in mind, we turn now to an explicit discussion of the Bahá'í conception of the "educated person."

Toward a Bahá'í Conception of "Education" and the "Educated Person"

Universal education is one of the fundamental principles to which Bahá'ís are committed. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote in ***The Secret of Divine Civilization,***

> The primary, the most urgent requirement is the promotion of education. It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward. The principle reason for the decline and fall of peoples is ignorance. Today the mass of people are uninformed even as to ordinary affairs, how much less do they grasp the core of the important problems and complex needs of the time. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1990, p. 109)

The importance of education from a Bahá'í perspective can be understood in part by an analogy to the potency of contagious disease:

> Education must be considered as most important, for as diseases in the world of bodies are extremely contagious, so, in the same way, qualities of spirit and heart are extremely contagious. Education has a universal influence, and the differences caused by it are very great. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1981, p. 214)

Indeed, education is seen as necessary for both social and individual welfare, and the teacher is seen as "the most potent factor in civilization and his work is the highest to which men can aspire" (Esslemont, 1980, p. 150). Returning to the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we read in a Tablet not only that, "Among the greatest of all great services is the education of children, and promotion of the various sciences, crafts and arts," but that:

> The education and training of children is among the most meritorious acts of humankind and draweth down the grace and favour of the All-Merciful, for education is the indispensable foundation of all human excellence and alloweth man to work his way to the heights of abiding glory. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1978, p. 129)

The advent of universal education, in fact, is actually seen by Bahá'ís as one of the characteristic features of the current dispensation. Although in the past, it may well have been possible for societies to educate only a tiny part of their populations, this is no longer the case. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá taught, "Bahá'u'lláh declares that all mankind should attain knowledge and acquire an education. This is a

necessary principle of religious belief and observance, characteristically new in this dispensation" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982b, p. 455).

The provision of an education to every child is, first and foremost, the responsibility of the child's parents, but, if they are unable to provide for their children's education, then the responsibility becomes a social and communal one. Bahá'u'lláh, in the ***Kitáb-I-Aqdas,*** makes clear the significance of this obligation:

> Unto every father hath been enjoined the instruction of his son and daughter in the art of reading and writing and in all that hath been laid down in the Holy Tablet. He that putteth away that which is commanded unto him, the Trustees are then to take from him that which is required for their instruction if he be wealthy and, if not, the matter devolveth upon the House of Justice. Verily have We made it a shelter for the poor and needy. He that bringeth up his son or the son of another, it is as though he hath brought up a son of Mine; upon him rest My glory, My loving-kindness, My mercy, that have compassed the world: (Bahá'u'lláh, 1993, p. 38)

Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh stresses the need for all members of the community to support education not only rhetorically, but financially as well:

> Everyone, whether man or woman, should hand over to a trusted person a portion of what he or she earneth through trade, agriculture or other occupation, for the training and education of children, to be spent for this purpose with the knowledge of the Trustees of the House of Justice. (Bahá'u'lláh, 1988b, p. 90)

This obligation is also one repeatedly and forcefully made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as the following passages make clear:

> Universal education is a universal law. It is, therefore, incumbent upon every father to teach and instruct his children according to his possibilities. If he is unable to educate them, the body politic, the representative of the people, must provide the means for their education. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982b, p. 300)

> And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is the promotion of education. Every child must be instructed in sciences as much as is necessary. If the parents are able to provide the expenses of this education, it is well, otherwise the community must provide the means for the teaching of that child. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1978, p. 304)

An important aspect of the Bahá'í commitment to and concern for education is the ubiquitous emphasis on the importance of educating both boys and girls. Typical passages from the Bahá'í writings in this regard include:

> Women have equal rights with men upon earth; in religion and society they are a very important element. As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1961, p. 133)

> There must be no difference in their education. Until the reality of equality between man and woman is fully established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982b, p. 76)

The equality discussed in these passages is in fact not absolute, though: if resources are too limited to make possible the education of both sons and daughters, 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes clear that it is the *daughters* who must be educated. In part, this is merely a matter of justice, since "woman has been denied the opportunities which man has so long enjoyed, especially the privilege of education" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982b, p. 75), but there is another, more practical, reason as well. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in ***The Promulgation of Universal Peace,*** comments that:

> Furthermore, the education of woman is more necessary and important than that of man, for woman is the trainer of the child from its infancy. If she be defective and imperfect herself, the child will necessarily be deficient; therefore, imperfection of woman implies a condition of imperfection in all mankind, for it is the mother who rears, nurtures and guides the growth of the child. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982b, pp. 133-134)

Having discussed the Bahá'í commitment to education in general terms, it is important to note that within the faith there are three quite distinct (albeit related) conceptualizations of "education." As 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained,

> . . . education is of three kinds: material, human and spiritual. Material education is concerned with the progress and development of the body, through gaining its sustenance, its material comfort and ease. This education is common to animals and man. Human education signifies civilization and progress - that is to say, government, administration, charitable works, trades, arts and handicrafts, sciences, great inventions and discoveries and elaborate institutions, which are the activities essential to man as distinguished from the animal. Divine education is that of the Kingdom of God: it consists in acquiring divine perfections, and this is true education; for in this state man becomes the focus of divine blessings, the manifestation of the words, "Let Us make man in Our image, and after Our likeness."(1) This is the goal of the world of humanity. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1981, pp. 7-8)

> . . . man is rescued from the exigencies of nature by training and culture; consequently, education is necessary, obligatory. But education is of various kinds. There is a training and development of the physical body which ensures strength and growth. There is intellectual education or mental training for which schools and colleges are founded. The third kind of education is that of the spirit. Through the breaths of the Holy Spirit man is

> uplifted into the world of moralities and illumined by the lights of divine bestowals. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982b, p. 330)

Thus, "education" includes what is commonly called "training," as well as academic learning and moral and spiritual education. Although all three are both necessary and valuable, they are not by any means of equal worth. It is education of the third sort, Divine education, that constitutes "true education" from a Bahá'í perspective, and it is this education of which Bahá'u'lláh speaks in the ***Kitáb-I-Aqdas:***

> The hope is cherished that ye may obtain true education in the shelter of the tree of His tender mercies and act in accordance with that which God desireth. Ye are all the leaves of one tree and the drops of one ocean. (Bahá'u'lláh, 1993, p. 92)

For children, too, it is with this Divine education that learning should begin:

> The word of God which the Supreme Pen hath recorded on the eighth leaf of the Most Exalted Paradise is the following: Schools must first train the children in the principles of religion, so that the Promise and the Threat recorded in the Books of God may prevent them from the things forbidden and adorn them with the mantle of the commandments; but this in such a measure that it may not injure the children by resulting in ignorant fanaticism and bigotry. (Bahá'u'lláh, 1988b, p. 68)

This does not, though, in any way detract from the value of other kinds of learning, . As 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes clear,

> The education of each child is compulsory . . . . In addition to this wide-spread education each child must be taught a profession, art, or trade, so that every member of the community will be enabled to earn his own livelihood. Work done in the spirit of service is the highest form of worship . . . (Compilation of Compilations, 1991)

Nor is academic learning (that is, "human education") in any way necessarily incompatible with the goals of Divine education (see Allen, 1993; Johnson, 1993). The unity of religion and science is, in fact, a core belief in the Bahá'í faith, as is the obligation to search for the truth:

> Religion and Science are inter-twined with each other and cannot be separated. These are the two wings with which humanity must fly. One wing is not enough. Every religion which does not concern itself with Science is mere tradition, and that is not the essential. Therefore science, education and civilization are most important necessities for the full religious life. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982a, pp. 28-29)

The fundamental compatibility of religion and science assumes, of course, a proper understanding of both; there are many "religious" beliefs that are demonstrably false, just as there are "scientific" beliefs

that are erroneous. Both religion and science, in short, must be open to the search for truth. With respect to education, this means that:

> Among those matters which require thorough revision and reform is the method of studying the various branches of knowledge and the organization of the academic curriculum. From lack of organization, education has become haphazard and confused. Trifling subjects which should not call for elaboration receive undue attention, to such an extent that students, over long periods of time, waste their minds and their energies on material that is pure supposition, in no way susceptible of proof, such study consisting in going deep into statements and concepts which careful examination would establish as not even unlikely, but rather as unalloyed superstition, and representing the investigation of useless conceits and the chasing of absurdities. There can be no doubt that to concern oneself with such illusions, to examine into and lengthily debate such idle propositions, is nothing but a waste of time and a marring of the days of one's life. Not only this, but it also prevents the individual from undertaking the study of those arts and sciences of which society stands in dire need. The individual should, prior to engaging in the study of any subject, ask himself what its uses are and what fruit and result will derive from it. If it is a useful branch of knowledge, that is, if society will gain important benefits from it, then he should certainly pursue it with all his heart. If not, if it consists in empty, profitless debates and in a vain concatenation of imaginings that lead to no result except acrimony, why devote one's life to such useless hairsplittings and disputes. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1990, pp. 105-106)

In other words, properly understood "human education" is essential to the educational development of the individual, but it can only be properly understood in the broader context of "Divine education." As Bahá'u'lláh explained,

> Although to acquire the sciences and arts is the greatest glory of mankind, this is so only on condition that man's river flow into the mighty Sea, and draw from God's ancient source his inspiration. When this cometh to pass, then every teacher is as a shoreless ocean, every pupil a prodigal fountain of knowledge. If, then, the pursuit of knowledge lead to the beauty of Him Who is the Object of all Knowledge, how excellent that goal; but if not, a mere drop will perhaps shut a man off from flooding grace, for with learning cometh arrogance and pride, and it bringeth on error and indifference to God . . . . The sciences of this world are bridges to reality; if then they lead not to reality, naught remains but fruitless illusion. By the one true God! If learning be not a means of access to Him, the Most Manifest, it is nothing but evident loss. (Quoted in Allen, 1993, pp. 10-11)

Closely related to the Bahá'í view of the three types of "education" is what is, in essence, the underlying epistemology of the Bahá'í faith. In ***Some Answered Questions,*** 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that there are four distinct methods by which human beings can acquire knowledge: by sense, by reason, by tradition, and by revelation from the Holy Spirit. His discussion of these four methods is important, since

it both parallels the different kinds of "education" and makes clear the existence of different *kinds* of knowledge:

> There are only four accepted methods of comprehension - that is to say, the realities of things are understood by these four methods.
>
> The first method is by the senses - that is to say, all that the eye, the ear, the taste, the smell, the touch perceive is understood by this method. Today this method is considered the most perfect by all the European philosophers: they say that the principal method of gaining knowledge is through the senses; they consider it supreme, although it is imperfect, for it commits errors. For example, the greatest of the senses is the power of sight. The sight sees the mirage as water, and it sees images reflected in mirrors as real and existent; large bodies which are distant appear to be small, and a whirling point appears as a circle. The sight believes the earth to be motionless and sees the sun in motion, and in many similar cases it makes mistakes. Therefore, we cannot trust it.
>
> The second is the method of reason, which was that of the ancient philosophers, the pillars of wisdom; this is the method of the understanding. They proved things by reason and held firmly to logical proofs; all their arguments are arguments of reason. Notwithstanding this, they differed greatly, and their opinions were contradictory. They even changed their views - that is to say, during twenty years they would prove the existence of a thing by logical arguments, and afterward they would deny it by logical arguments - so much so that Plato at first logically proved the immobility of the earth and the movement of the sun; later by logical arguments he proved that the sun was the stationary center, and that the earth was moving. Afterward the Ptolemaic theory was spread abroad, and the idea of Plato was entirely forgotten, until at last a new observer again called it to life. Thus all the mathematicians disagreed, although they relied upon arguments of reason. In the same way, by logical arguments, they would prove a problem at a certain time, then afterward by arguments of the same nature they would deny it. So one of the philosophers would firmly uphold a theory for a time with strong arguments and proofs to support it, which afterward he would retract and contradict by arguments of reason. Therefore, it is evident that the method of reason is not perfect, for the differences of the ancient philosophers, the want of stability and the variations of their opinions, prove this. For if it were perfect, all ought to be united in their ideas and agreed in their opinions.
>
> The third method of understanding is by tradition - that is, through the text of the Holy Scriptures - for people say, "In the Old and New Testaments, God spoke thus." This method equally is not perfect, because the traditions are understood by the reason. As the reason itself is liable to err, how can it be said that in interpreting the meaning of the traditions it will not err, for it is possible for it to make mistakes, and certainty cannot be attained. This is the method of the religious leaders; whatever they understand and comprehend from the text of the books is that which their reason understands from the text, and not necessarily the real truth; for the reason is like a balance, and the meanings contained in the text of the Holy Books are like the thing which is weighed. If the balance is untrue, how can the weight be ascertained?

> Know then: that which is in the hands of people, that which they believe, is liable to error. For, in proving or disproving a thing, if a proof is brought forward which is taken from the evidence of our senses, this method, as has become evident, is not perfect; if the proofs are intellectual, the same is true; or if they are traditional, such proofs also are not perfect. Therefore, there is no standard in the hands of people upon which we can rely.
>
> But the bounty of the Holy Spirit gives the true method of comprehension which is infallible and indubitable. This is through the help of the Holy Spirit which comes to man, and this is the condition in which certainty can alone be attained. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 1981, pp. 297-299)

This brings us to the Bahá'í view of the proper aims and goals of education. As one would expect from the discussion thus far, the ultimate educational goal for the Bahá'í educator is spiritual in nature. Human education provides the foundation upon which spiritual education must be built, but it cannot itself be the end of the educational experience. Rather, "human education" must be utilized for spiritual ends. For example, critical thinking is a valuable and worthwhile educational goal, but not, as the Universal House of Justice makes clear in the following passage, for its own sake, but rather is valuable for its role in helping the individual to make moral and spiritual decisions:

> In most areas of human behaviour there are acts which are clearly contrary to the Law of God and others which are clearly approved or permissible; between these there is often a grey area where it is not immediately apparent what should be done. This is the age in which mankind must attain maturity, and one aspect of this is the assumption by individuals of the course of action in areas which are left open by the Law of God. (Quoted in Johnson, 1993, p. 6)

The real goal for education, then, is the striving for spiritual perfection -- both for the individual and the society. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá admonishes,

> Strive thou with heart and soul; see to it that the children are raised up to embody the highest perfections of humankind, to such a degree that every one of them will be trained in the use of the mind, in acquiring knowledge, in humility and lowliness, in dignity, in ardour and love. (Quoted in Allen, 1993, p. 25)

And, moving from the individual to the society, what such an approach to education will lead to is Divine civilization itself -- a civilization described compelling as follows:

> Divine civilization, however, so traineth every member of society that no one, with the exception of a negligible few, will undertake to commit a crime. There is thus a great difference between the prevention of crime through measures that are violent and retaliatory, and so training the people, and enlightening them and spiritualizing them, that without any fear of punishment or vengeance to come, they will shun all criminal acts.

> They will, indeed, look upon the very commission of a crime as a great disgrace and in itself the harshest of punishments. They will become enamoured of human perfections, and will consecrate their lives to whatever will bring light to the world and will further those qualities which are acceptable at the Holy Threshold of God. (Quoted in Allen, 1993, p. 25)

In short, the goal of a Bahá'í education is simply that, to once again quote 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Good behaviour and high more character must come first" (quoted in Allen, 1993, p. 25).

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, it is clear that the Bahá'í faith, the youngest of the world's monotheistic religions, places an immense emphasis on education. Education is seen as a universal right, the means by which both social and individual development can take place, as well as an important element in religious and spiritual growth. Both secular and religious learning is viewed favorably, so long as it is put to a defensible purpose. The key concepts of Bahá'í education are closely related to and intertwined with other aspects of the Bahá'í faith, most notably those of the independent search for truth, the equality of men and women, and the harmony of science and religion.

At the same time, it is important to note that much of contemporary education is, from a Bahá'í perspective, seriously lacking. As Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Faith, commented:

> People today indeed do tend to be very superficial in their thinking, and it would seem as if the educational systems in use are sorely lacking in ability to produce a mature mind in a person who has reached supposedly adult life! All the outside influences that surround the individual seem to have an intensely distracting effect, and it is a hard job to get the average person to do any deep thinking or even a little meditation on the problems facing him and the world at large. (Effendi, 1973, p. 21)

The challenge facing Bahá'í educators, in short, is to move the reality of contemporary practice closer to the ideal outlined by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi -- no small task, but one which does seem to have much promise.

Notes

1. Bahá'ís actually trace the development of their faith to the declaration, in 1844, of a young man called the Báb (which means "the Gate"). The Báb, who was both a Manifestation of God in his own right as well as the forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh, announced that a new messenger of God would soon appear. The Báb and some 22,000 of his followers were massacred by the Persian government, who saw them as heretics. Among the Báb's followers was Bahá'u'lláh, who announced on April 22, 1863, in Ridván (near Baghdad) that He was the One whose coming had been foretold by the Báb.

2. Bahá'u'lláh died in 1892, and, as per the explicit instructions in his will, was succeeded by his eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who is known to Bahá'ís as "the Master." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who died in 1921, was in turn succeeded by his grandson Shoghi Effendi, who is called the "Guardian of the Faith." Shoghi Effendi's death left the Bahá'í faith without a leader; instead, as Bahá'u'lláh had foretold, his death in 1957 made possible the first election of the Universal House of Justice, which is the international governing body of the Bahá'í community. For an interesting, non-Bahá'í account of the transformations which have taken place in the history of the faith, see Johnson (1974).

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